

St Vincent and the Grenadines



KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1979
Population:	109,000 (2009)
GDP p.c. growth:	3.8% p.a. 1990–2009
Official language:	English
Time:	GMT minus 4hr
Currency:	Eastern Caribbean dollar (EC\$)

Geography

Area:	389.3 sq km
Coastline:	84km
Capital:	Kingstown

St Vincent and the Grenadines, one of the Windward Island countries of the Eastern Caribbean, lies near the southern end of the Caribbean chain, about 97km north of Grenada. The country comprises six parishes, one of which being Grenadines.

Area: Total land area 389.3 sq km: St Vincent 344 sq km, and the Grenadines 45.3 sq km.

Main towns: Kingstown (capital, pop. 16,600 in 2009), Georgetown (1,500), Byera (1,200), Biabou (910) and Chateaubelair (640) on St Vincent; Port Elizabeth (770) on Bequia in the Grenadines.

Topography: The country comprises the island of St Vincent and the northern Grenadines, a series of 32 islands and cays, stretching south-west towards Grenada. (The southern Grenadine islands are part of Grenada.) The larger northern Grenadines are Bequia (pronounced Beck-way), Canouan, Mayreau, Mustique, Isle D'Quatre and Union Island. St Vincent is volcanic in origin, and has an active volcano, La Soufrière, which erupted violently in 1812, and again in 1902. A mild eruption in 1971–72 created a volcanic dome in the crater lake, forming an island. This exploded in another eruption in 1979, blasting ash, steam and stones high into the air. A rugged mountain range runs from La Soufrière in the north to Mt St Andrew (750m) above the Kingstown Valley in the south. This mountainous backbone sends off lateral spurs which are intersected by wooded valleys and numerous streams. Many of the beaches of St Vincent are of black volcanic sand; there are some white-sand beaches. The Grenadines have been much celebrated for their beaches of fine white sand and clear waters.

Climate: Tropical, moderated by trade winds in June/July. The dry season is January to May, the rainy season May/June to September.

did you know?

Most of St Vincent is rugged and mountainous, volcanic in origin and with an active volcano, La Soufrière, which rises to 1,234m and is the island's highest point; it last erupted in April 1979, and last erupted violently in 1902.

It is one of a minority of countries in the Commonwealth that have recorded increases in forest areas during 1990–2005; more than a quarter of the land area is forested.

Many of St Vincent's beaches are of black volcanic sand, while the Grenadine beaches are of fine white sand.

There is significantly heavier rainfall in the mountainous interior. Tropical storms and hurricanes may occur June–November.

Environment: The most significant environmental issue is pollution of coasts and coastal waters by discharges from yachts and from industrial plants on shore.

Vegetation: The mountains of St Vincent support a luxuriant growth of tropical forest; coconuts and the more typical tropical coral island vegetation occur on the Grenadines and coastal fringes of St Vincent island. Forest covers about 27% of the land area, having increased at 0.8% p.a. 2000–05. The botanical gardens, founded in 1765, conserve rare species, including the mangosteen fruit tree, and a descendant from Captain Bligh’s original breadfruit tree.

Wildlife: The Buccament Valley east of Layou is a tropical rainforest reserve, home to the endangered St Vincent parrot, as well as many other species such as the unique whistling warbler. Bequia’s rich marine flora and fauna make it a popular resort for divers.

Transport: There are 829km of roads, 70% paved. Cruiseships call at St Vincent. A mail boat runs several times a week through the Grenadines and ferries operate between the islands.

E T Joshua International Airport is at Arnos Vale, 3km south-east of Kingstown. There are small airports/airstrips on Bequia, Union Island, Canouan and Mustique. A new international airport was due to be opened at Argyle in the east of St Vincent in 2012.

Society

KEY FACTS 2009

Population per sq km: 280
 Life expectancy: 72 years
 Net primary enrolment: 95%

Population: 109,000 (2009); 49% lives in urban areas; growth 0.2% p.a. 1990–2009; birth rate 17 per 1,000 people (40 in 1970); life expectancy is 72 years (63 in 1970).

The population is mostly of African or mixed descent, with Indian, European, and Carib minorities.

Language: English is the official language; an English-based Creole is widely spoken.

Religion: Mainly Christians (Anglicans 47%, Methodists 28%, Roman Catholics 13%); with a small community of Hindus.

Media: *The Herald* is a daily paper; weekly newspapers include *The News*, *Searchlight* and *The Vincentian*.

Public services SVG Television and NBC Radio are operated by St Vincent and the Grenadines Broadcasting Corporation. There are several private radio stations.

There are 152 personal computers (2005) and 696 internet users (2009) per 1,000 people.

Education: Public spending on education was 6.6% of GDP in 2009. There are 14 years of school education starting at age five. Primary school comprises seven years and secondary seven, with cycles of five and two years. The school year starts in September.

Tertiary education is provided at the regional University of the West Indies, which has campuses in Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Health: As well as Kingstown General Hospital, there are district hospitals and health centres. Infant mortality was 11 per 1,000 live births in 2009.

Communications: Country code 1 784; internet domain ‘.vc’. There are phonecard booths and internet cafes on most islands. The main post office is located in Kingstown, with branches throughout the country.

There are 211 main telephone lines and 1,109 mobile phone subscriptions per 1,000 people (2009).

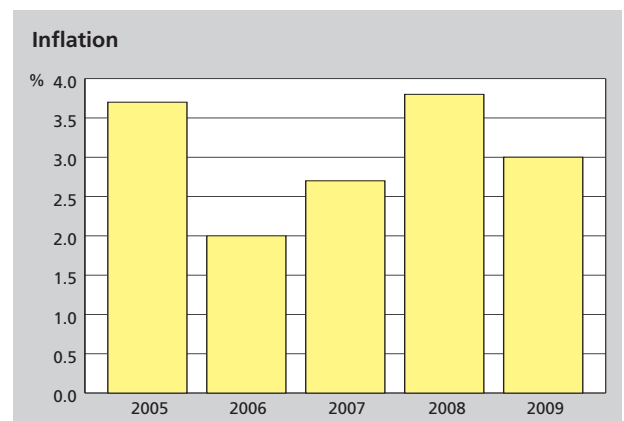
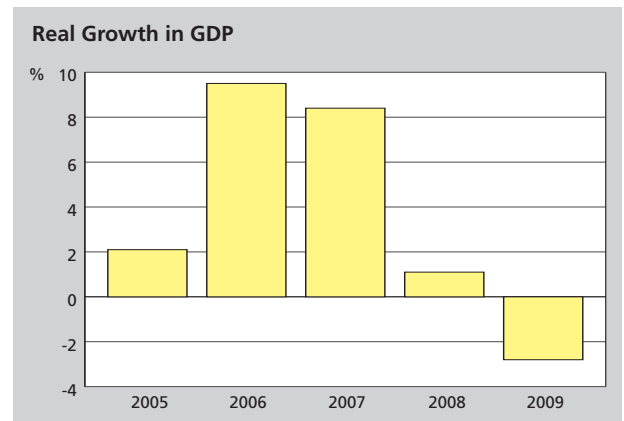
Public holidays: New Year’s Day, National Heroes’ Day (14 March), Labour Day (first Monday in May), Carnival (Monday and Tuesday in July), Emancipation Day (first Monday in August), Independence Day (27 October), Christmas Day and Boxing Day. Carnival continues for ten days leading up to Carnival Tuesday.

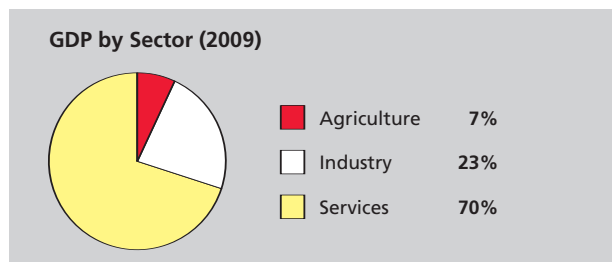
Religious and other festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Good Friday, Easter Monday and Whit Monday.

Economy

KEY FACTS 2009

GNI: US\$560m
 GNI p.c.: US\$5,130
 GDP growth: 3.6% p.a. 2005–09
 Inflation: 3.1% p.a. 2005–09





Overview: St Vincent and the Grenadines has a relatively undeveloped economy, nevertheless providing a relatively high quality of life. It is vulnerable as the economic base is very small, and is heavily dependent on agriculture and especially bananas.

The main export crop, bananas, was sold to the EU under its preferential arrangements, but since these ended in 2007, Caribbean banana producers have faced a tougher competitive environment, and small, less efficient producers have moved out of banana production. The government has encouraged diversification into tourism, manufacturing, offshore finance and call centres, and has promoted growth of the private sector.

Economic growth fluctuates with agricultural output and prices on world markets. The economy has, however, been prudently managed and inflation and debt have generally been relatively modest. By the mid-2000s, with new investment in tourism infrastructure, economic growth was strong – averaging 5.6% p.a. 2004–08 – but in the face of the world economic downturn of 2008–09, slowed sharply in 2008 (1.1%) and contracted in 2009 (2.8%).

Trade: The main export is bananas.

Constitution

Status: Monarchy under Queen Elizabeth II
Legislature: House of Assembly
Independence: 27 October 1979

St Vincent and the Grenadines is a constitutional monarchy and representative democracy, with Queen Elizabeth II as head of state, represented by a governor-general. The legislature is unicameral, with a House of Assembly of 21 members comprising 15 members elected at least every five years by universal adult suffrage and six senators appointed by the governor-general (four on the advice of the prime minister and two on that of the leader of the opposition). The leader of the majority party in the House of Assembly becomes prime minister and selects and heads a cabinet.

Politics

Last elections: December 2010
Next elections: 2015/2016
Head of state: Queen Elizabeth II, represented by governor-general, Sir Frederick Ballantyne (2002–)
Head of government: Prime Minister Dr Ralph Gonsalves
Ruling party: Unity Labour Party

The New Democratic Party (NDP), led by James Fitz-Allen Mitchell, was returned to power at the 1989 elections, and at the 1994

elections, when it took 12 seats. The remaining three seats were taken by the St Vincent Labour Party (SVLP) and Movement for National Unity coalition, which, led by Vincent Beache, later merged to become the Unity Labour Party (ULP).

In the general election in June 1998 the ruling NDP narrowly won a fourth successive election taking eight of the House of Assembly's 15 seats, with only 45% of the votes cast. The ULP had had high hopes of winning and came very close to it, receiving 55% of the votes and winning seven seats, four of which were gained from the NDP.

Following public protests at the raising of MPs' remuneration and pensions, in May 2000, through the offices of OECS and CARICOM, the government agreed with the ULP that there would be a general election by end March 2001.

In August 2000, Mitchell stepped down from the presidency of the ruling NDP and was replaced by Finance Minister Arnhim Eustace, who became prime minister in October.

The March 2001 general election was won by the ULP with 12 seats, ending almost 17 years of NDP government and ULP leader Dr Ralph Gonsalves became prime minister. At the opening of parliament in April, the new government announced that it would initiate a process of constitutional review, among other things to consider replacing the UK's Privy Council as the final court of appeal by the Caribbean Court of Justice and replacing the British monarch as head of state by a ceremonial president.

In 2003, St Vincent and the Grenadines became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement.

In February 2005 the Constitutional Review Commission proposed far-reaching reforms including replacement of the British monarch as head of state by an indirectly elected president, establishment of a non-partisan 'council of elders' to advise on public appointments and issues of the day, and reconstituting the legislature to include representatives of civil society as well as directly elected and appointed members.

In the December 2005 general election the ULP was returned, again winning 12 seats, and Gonsalves continued as prime minister.

The ULP won a third consecutive general election in December 2010, with eight seats; Gonsalves was returned as prime minister. The NDP, led by Arnhim Eustace, secured the remaining seven seats.

International relations

St Vincent and the Grenadines is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, Association of Caribbean States, Caribbean Community, Non-Aligned Movement, Organization of American States, Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, United Nations and World Trade Organization.

Traveller information

Local laws and conventions: Illegal drugs are viewed seriously in St Vincent and the Grenadines, and there are severe penalties for

possession of all drugs – including cannabis. It is an offence for anyone, including children, to wear camouflage clothing.

Casual clothing is widely acceptable; beachwear should be for beach only. English is spoken everywhere, often with a Vincentian patois. Office hours are Mon–Fri 0800–1615.

Immigration and customs: Passports must be valid for six months from the date of entry. Visitors must also be in possession of an onward ticket and have sufficient funds for their stay.

Firearms and ammunition and spear-fishing equipment are prohibited imports, and import licences are required for all foodstuffs. All prescription medications should be kept in their original container, clearly labelled to avoid misunderstandings.

A yellow fever vaccination certificate will be required from those arriving from an infected area.

Travel within the country: Traffic drives on the left-hand side and a local driving permit is required to drive on the islands. Visitors can obtain a local licence from car hire companies and police stations on presentation of a national driving licence. Some mountainous roads are extremely steep with hairpin bends.

Taxis are widely available and charge government-fixed rates. It is advisable to check the fare before setting off.

Small planes can be chartered for travel between islands and it is very easy to charter ships to sail between the islands – both privately and with a sea taxi.

Buses offer cheap, reliable transport between towns. A number of minibus/pick-up truck passenger services also operate throughout the islands and can be flagged down on bus routes.

Travel health: Medical services are generally good in St Vincent and the Grenadines, although full health insurance with emergency repatriation is recommended, as visitors are expected to pay full medical costs.

Mosquito-borne dengue fever is endemic to the Caribbean, and insect repellent and suitable clothing should be taken to protect against mosquito bites.

Mains water is normally chlorinated; bottled water is widely available.

Money: Major international credit and debit cards are widely accepted, and travellers cheques should be taken in US dollars to

History

The country's first known inhabitants were Arawaks, who were later driven out by Caribs; the latter put up a strong resistance to European colonisation. Christopher Columbus sighted the principal island on 22 January 1498, and named it after the saint whose feast falls on that day. No immediate European immigration followed this discovery. In 1627 Charles I of England granted the island to Lord Carlisle, but no settlers arrived. Charles II granted it to Lord Willoughby in 1672; possession was disputed by the British, French and Spanish. All these claims were resisted by the Caribs. The Caribs did not, however, oppose the settlement of a shipload of enslaved Africans who escaped after a shipwreck in 1673, and in due course seem to have merged with the Carib community through intermarriage. In 1773, under an Anglo/Carib treaty, the Caribs were allowed to continue to live independently in the north of the island. France took the island in 1779, but restored it to Britain in 1783, under the Treaty of Versailles. In 1795–96, the Caribs rebelled, aided by the French in Martinique; when this had been crushed, the rebels were deported to the island of Roatan in the Bay of Honduras. A plantation economy, based on slave labour, developed, producing sugar, cotton, coffee and cocoa. But in 1812 La Soufrière erupted and devastated much of the island. After the emancipation of slaves by Britain in 1834, indentured labour from the East Indies and Portugal was brought in to remedy the labour shortage.

In the second half of the 19th century sugar slumped and the economy remained very depressed for the rest of the century. In the early 20th century, a series of natural disasters further damaged the society: with a severe hurricane, and a further eruption of La Soufrière in 1902 which devastated the northern half of the island and killed 2,000 people.

St Vincent and the Grenadines was a member of the Federation of the West Indies. After its dissolution in 1962, and the move of larger Caribbean countries to independence individually, the transition towards independence began in St Vincent. At first, the smaller Eastern Caribbean countries attempted to set up a federation of their own, but negotiations among them were unsuccessful. Universal adult suffrage had already been established (and the executive council became partly elective) in 1951. Internal self-government was achieved in 1969 and full independence in October 1979.

Elections held two months after independence in 1979 gave overwhelming victory to Milton Cato's St Vincent Labour Party (SVLP), the party which had campaigned most vigorously for independence.

The newly independent country faced a series of political difficulties with, first, an armed rebellion on Union Island by a Rastafarian minority led by Bumba Charles, and then protests early in the 1980s, which led to special 'public order' legislation. Cato called an early general election in mid-1984, but was defeated by James Fitz-Allen Mitchell's New Democratic Party (NDP), formed in 1975. Mitchell, then standing as an independent, had been premier between 1972–74.

Mitchell's NDP came to power in 1984 advocating policies of closer economic and ultimately political union with the neighbouring Eastern Caribbean countries. The country had played an active part in the establishment of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States in 1981, which achieved several of the aims the countries had failed to achieve through the aborted plan for an East Caribbean Federation.

ensure a better exchange rate. ATMs can be found in all the towns. Banking hours are Mon–Thur 0800–1300 and Fri 0800–1700.

There were 73,000 tourist arrivals in 2009.

Further information

Government of St Vincent and the Grenadines: www.gov.vc

Commonwealth Secretariat: www.thecommonwealth.org

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